The Politics of Watching:
Visuality and the New Media Economy

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to consume and produce images non-stop in the new media economy? Images can be captured, uploaded, downloaded, and disseminated with ease in digital platforms, raising the need to understand how these acts of image capture and circulation are embedded into the familiar and everyday as well as the extraordinary where images can re-negotiate cognitive realities and re-frame notions of authenticity and truth. This new media visuality is characterised by new consumption rituals and practices which transgress the boundaries between private pleasures, personal memories, and voyeurism, on the one hand, and public communion, witnessing, and expose on the other. This paper examines the notion of visuality in digital platforms and its consequences for postmodernity in terms of subjectivity, new forms of engagement and disenfranchisement.

Keywords: *Convergence, Digital Media, Image, Mobile Telephony, New Media Technology, Postmodernity, Visuality*

INTRODUCTION

The world found out that Osama bin Laden was killed by the US military through images of President Obama watching footages of the event. The news was supposed to be authenticated by the ritual of Obama witnessing the event with his close aides. No images of the gory killing were released to the public even though images of his hiding place, his compound and bedroom were circulated widely. Mediated visuality is an intrinsic component of postmodernity where the manipulation of the image mediates our notions of reality and truth. This mediated visuality in the digital age has become even more complex in the new media environment where image capture, production and circulation have become more prevalent, pervasive and open-ended.

The convergence of technologies and the embedding of video and audio recording devices on mobile telephony and the ability to share and publish them on a globally-connected digital platform in our everyday lives have facilitated the circulation of images on private and public spaces on the internet. The Web 2.0 environment is defined by enhanced applications, increased utilization of applications by users, and the inclusion of content-generative technologies into everyday life. By shifting the flow of information from the one-way broadcast model, these new applications allow information to flow in different ways enabling content creation to be dynamic and pervasive.

The ability to record, store images and sound bites and additionally to upload them

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on the Internet enables civilians to become image creators when events happen across the globe. The act of recording through mobile technologies and the ability to circulate images across the world crafts new rituals where the bystander through the act of recording bears witness through technology. This material act of bearing witness through technology unleashes a new visibility where the civilian gaze can narrate events without the mediation of news makers onto multimedia platforms which can potentially invite non-stop viewing from audiences around the globe. With broadcasting and the availability of multi-media facilities on the Internet, there has been a privileging of the eye with an emphasis on visuality.

In postmodernity, technology can bring new forms of existence in spatio-temporal terms and reconfigure the horizon in which human interactions are placed and unfolded (Lattas, 2006, p. 31). Roger Silverstone (1994) in his theorisation of the domestication of technology postulates that the meaning and significance of all our media and information technologies depend entirely on the engagement of the user where the cognitive participation can both blur the spacio-temporal spaces while reinforcing it. Media technologies and their domestication are seen as playing a crucial role in the ontology of everyday life. Life is experienced through both the formal (rituals) and informal (mundane) structures of the everyday (Silverstone, 1994, p. 169). It enables the translation of the new into the familiar and the unfamiliar to be objectified, integrated or distanced through the meanings imposed in the private realm. The world around us is streamed through broadcast and online platforms engaging us beyond the realms of our situated domesticity. Media technologies enable new forms of signification and integration over expanded spatialities. The dissolution of distance, temporality and the inscribing of new values through the representation of images signify a global media economy where the transportation and dissemination of materials happen non-stop in our media saturated environment.

Paddy Scannell's (1996a, 1996b) seminal writings implicate the mass media in everyday schedules (i.e., radio and television) contributing to the emergence of a mass consciousness shaped by technology through the rituals of broadcasting, its incumbent temporality and the communion of the masses through the act of watching. Broadcasting through its 'dailiness' provides a 'continuity, reliability and a familiarity.' The entwining of the personal with the mediated broadcast space signifies the coalescing of imagination to form our cognitive realities of the wider world. The media space is the stage where the 'global' is narrated through the dailiness of news and documentary where our secure 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1991) are constantly juxtaposed through the presentation of 'imagined others' who inhabit the globe. Benedict Anderson constructed these communities not through the reality of their existence but the ways and forms they are imagined. This intrinsically implicates the biases in communication technologies where the eye may be privileged over the ear or in specific terms where visuality may prevail over orality. Moving beyond the arguments of bias posited by Harold Innis (1950, 1964), Anderson invoked the rituals of communion where media artefacts and consumption provide the means to base this imagination. Imagination is then both limited and governed through the different types of medium.

Like television, new media provide forms of voyeurism where one can 'travel' the globe and imagine it through both the non-stop narratives that are streamed in via video platforms on the World Wide Web. The wider world is constantly constructed through one's active engagement with content and technology and equally through the mobility this medium enables. Space is a recurrent metaphor in media theory for it signifies the construction of cognitive realities such as public spheres where we debate and scrutinize issues consequential to our public and private lives. Throughout the trajectory of media studies, media is theorised as 'doubling' (Scannell, 1996b) or even a multiplying of places (Couldry, 2000) or perhaps leading to a sense of 'placelessness' (Meyrowitz, 1985).

Media's role in shaping our cognitive reality, temporality and notions of distance has been well documented in media theory. The socialization of mass consciousness through the broadcasting space and its role in creating mass spectatorship of media events is largely dependent on the visual. Kathryn Moore (2003, p. 26) reasons that the concept of visual thinking is deeply embedded in our culture and an intrinsic part of our lives. The role of images in structuring or perhaps restructuring reality has consumed much of the debates both in art history and equally in the field of photography (Barthes, 1977; Sontag, 1977; Zelizer, 1998, 2001; Sekula, 1984; Mitchell, 1994). Often the image is a short-hand for both objectivity and subjectivity and creating 'a crisis of faith in optical empiricism' (Tagg, 1992). In C. Wright Mills apt description of our 'second-hand world,' this constant circulation and repetition of images constitute a terrain of mediation where images are not innocent of cultural formation nor are they innocent of forming culture.

The disembbedding of both temporality and context reconfigure the consumption practices on the Internet. Lisa Parks (2004, p. 38) in reviewing newer media forms observes that the 'meanings, knowledge and experiences of time/space and movement have themselves shifted with different technologies, geographies, users and socio-historic conditions'. In critiquing the 'annihilation of time-space discourse' against the web environment, she points out that it has led to the creation of a fantasy of 'digital nomadism' where the user in the Internet environment is free to roam through the electronic terrain and assume different identities. Parks contends that our cognitive realities are limited through a combination of geographic, artistic, linguistic and visual systems of signification. Our power economies within the home and the outer world as well as our cultural systems of signification both define and constrain our imagination of the global and our sense of 'otherness' that can emerge in our postmodern condition.

Distance and temporality are negotiated through new interactive technologies which not only connect the world but create new visibilities by highlighting remote parts of the world. Our intrusion into these hitherto inaccessible spaces constructs the globe as one that is wired and open to media intrusion enacting a pervasive gaze that can capture the human condition when it's faced with new travesties or trauma, where new media events and cultural tropes can be created through these technological visibilities and connectivity.

Spectacle and Representation

New media technologies enable the act of making something visible and as such invoke public spectacle and its moral gaze. John Thompson (2000) contends this has lead to the radical transformation of public visibility. This 'mediated visibility' conflates making visible with making public and in this sense electronic media creates new structures of proximity and distance which can influence cognitive realities. Making public cannot then be deemed as an altruistic act that functions in the interest of the public but inversely can undermine and manipulate public sensibilities. John Thompson's (1995, 2005, p. 32) 'interactional theory' posits that by using communication media individuals create new forms of actions and interactions which have their own distinctive properties both in terms of consequences and risk.

Guy Debord (1995, p. 12) surmised that an immense accumulation of spectacles occur in societies with modern conditions of production. In such societies 'all that was once directly lived has become mere representation'. The notion of spectacle both distracts and depoliticizes the public from the full potential of human agency. The spectacle for Debord detracted from lived experience, turning people into consumers of images which in turn reproduced life.

The conjoining of technology, image and mass spectacle has without question raised issues about the ethics of watching, the perversity of the human condition and the loss of aura and authenticity of art through relentless mass reproduction in modernity. Walter Benjamin (1969, p. 96), described photography as transforming 'misery into an object of consumption.'

The loss of aura and authenticity in the age of reproduction created new functions beyond those of truth and testimony. The image is then open to a multitude of functions and readings (Berger, 1972). Both Benjamin and Debord opined that pervasive spectacle recontextualised consumption of images where new meanings and functions can supersede the original elements. Frederic Jameson (1992, p. 1) categorises the visual as 'essentially pornographic' for it unleashes rapt mindless fascination.

It is important to ponder the future role of radically new aesthetics in a world in which senses are manipulated by new technology (Jackson, 1999, p. 314). New media present new challenges for negotiating meaning through sensory input by providing new types of experiences as well as image production and consumption. The Internet with its video streaming facility enables spectatorship at a mouse click bringing new forms of news seeking, archiving and publishing. Here the imagination of communion with unseen societies (Anderson, 1991) or detachment through 'compassion fatigue' (Sontag, 2003) can be equally representative of modernity where technology can induce moral apathy or empathy.

Andrew Dudley (1997, p. viii) in commenting on the works of Walter Benjamin points out that Benjamin in relation to other theorists 'strove to relate this new image culture to a modernity that involves new forms of subjectivity and social organization.' Similarly, Jean Paul Sarte's (1956, pp. 340-400) conceptualisation of 'The Look' again emphasises the power economies of gazing where there is an objectification of the subject gazed at. For Sarte this 'look' disempowers people of their agency to narrate themselves. In the digital age images enter complex consumption, production and distribution economies and this new mediated visuality traverses a multitude of phenomena both collective and personal.

Implications of Image Economy

The ability to capture images non-stop on the move through mobile technologies and the connectivities between these image and communication technologies and the Internet has created a culture where the image is centralised, shared and circulated endlessly. Kindberg et al. (2005, p. 1546) offer two main dimensions for capturing images. The first relates to the affective (i.e., emotional) or the functional element (i.e., to support the accomplishment of a particular task), and the second to the social (i.e., sharing) versus the individual dimension where no sharing is intended. Multimedia devices provide a means to not only record events for later recall, but they are also central in the complex aspects of co-constructing 'being-there' emotions and sociability (Jacucci et al., 2007, p. 233). The online environment is an important platform for social connection especially among young people and to provide support and communion for niche or marginalized communities. It becomes a space to record and narrate important events and history. In the process they contribute to the creation of user-led memory archives which can narrate history and temporality away from entrenched institutions. The act of sharing information and data beyond creating repositories can function as a therapeutic device during war, conflict or episodes of human tragedy (Herring et al., 2005).

The role of images in crafting spaces for communion and empathy has been exemplified during war and natural disasters. For example, in the case of the Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina civilian images and videos in online spaces provided another way to connect with the events and to sustain interest and concern for those involved. Mobile phones and the internet were used to raise funds for the victims, to co-ordinate aid efforts, to provide eye-witness accounts through blogs and to raise awareness about victims who were missing or found (Cadoret, 2005). The image economy is then associated with notions of empowerment, accountability, and the politics of pity where the public spectacle becomes a device to expose atrocities and invite moral condemnation of the perpetrators and equally to create communion and empathy with victims of strife and suffering.

The integration of user-generated content as well as the inclusion of video formats in news websites has made news consumption a more textured and fluid rather than a static experience. News-making whilst primarily mediated through the political economy of media industries, is not closed off to the civilian gaze in postmodernity. Digital platforms have created new connections between mainstream media and the general public who capture and record events. The notion of a 'media event' advanced by Dayan and Katz (1992) looked mainly at broadcasting whose social and narrative codes and ability to suspend time have become important devices in the formation of national communion and memory. The construction of a 'media event' today is much more open-ended where the civilian gaze and digital platforms have added to the commentary of television's moving images. This has been illustrated through various media events such as 9/11, the Asian tsunami, the 7/7 bombings, Hurricane Katrina and the summer floods in the UK in 2007.

Web 2.0 is also about ordering knowledge and information in different ways. For example, search engines and tags attached to data are mediating the classification of content both text and image. These classification systems of content (such as *Deli.icio.us, Digg, CiteU-Like, Flickr, Technorati*) allow users to tag their favourite web resources with their chosen words or phrases. In the process they create a hierarchy or taxonomy defined through users' preference and interpretation. Personal consumption rituals can influence collective viewing through this tagging culture.

Image manipulation and mash-ups have inversely created new ways to engage with politics and question the conventions of political communication. According to Margot Turkheimer (2007), American online video technology is playing a significant role in mediating politics and political engagement. She contends that YouTube and video communication have become important in shaping people's perception of presidential candidates and election campaigns in America in recent political history. In the Obama presidential campaign both YouTube and social networking sites were used to connect with younger voters who are 'traditionally uninterested in politics' (Schifferes, 2008). According to the Pew Research Center's study conducted in October 2008 the proportion of voters who had viewed videos about the recent American election campaign had increased substantially since the start of the election season. Overall, 39% of voters had watched some type of campaign-related video online.

Without doubt, digital platforms have created a culture of sharing and conveying emotions and events through images. A study by Sarvas et al. (2005) showed that 89% of digitally taken photos are shared at least once and that most of the sharing is done within three days of taking (Van House et al., 2005, p. 1854). This culture of sharing, as Koskinen (cf. Reponen et al., 2008) points out, also hinges on issues of trust between people who share sensitive material where mutual trust can determine what is circulated or controlled. The ritual of sharing constitutes a form of gift-giving or a symbolic form of exchange which helped sustain social relationships and networks (Taylor & Harper, 2002, p. 440; Licoppe & Heurtin, 2001). O'Hara et al. (2007) point out that people could bring content into social situations and places to create meaning and value in ways not possible with traditional media technology such as television. The display of content in mobile devices to facilitate conversation (as opposed to storing content for personal consumption) is also a key motivator. Beyond the rituals of gift giving, new media platforms provide spaces to construct and archive personal and collective memory. Digital media platforms enable the creation of people's archives divorced from institutional power economies. These however can be decentred, misleading and confusing where the accumulation of images may be divorced from a coherent commentary, historical chronology or continuity. The role of user-generated images in recording history and memory and thwarting official representations of events makes it

a difficult device that is both destabilizing and empowering.

Image Economy and Risk

Beyond issues of empowerment and communion, the phenomenon of endlessly capturing and circulating of images through MMS, the Internet, blogs and emails integrates new paradigms of risk including transgressions of security and privacy both individual and collective. The pervasive exchange and dissemination of images on the Internet has to reconcile with issues of data retention and a persistent retentive memory (Custers, 2008) where information or self-profiles can be circulated and retained in some form online where they can be truncated from their original source and mashed with other websites and content completely unrelated.

While new media spaces celebrate the ability for audiences to become producers, digital platforms can equally create new digital divides and vulnerabilities obstructing citizenship to new communities through literacy and access issues. The new media image economy is both about the emergence of vibrant visual cultures as well as deceptive practices which can mislead and manipulate audiences. The YouTube culture proliferates and circulates images dislodged or truncated from their source. For example, the commodification of suffering through clips and hyperlinks creates a ritual of segmenting suffering from its context to be consumed on demand.

This mouse-click aestheticization and consumption of suffering can invite global spectatorship into unknown events of suffering in remote spaces. In the process it can work to raise awareness of events which mainstream media may not have access to. On the other hand, the commodification of suffering can enter an economy of circulation where it serves to assuage our human obsession with suffering where everything can be uploaded as a global public spectacle without any consideration for human suffering or dignity. This pervasive visuality is dialectical as it can trigger communal agency and empathy and equally work to anaesthesetize and numb our ability to connect and feel the pain of others. Unlike broadcasting which can push information to its audience, the user-led environment of the Internet can initiate selective amnesia and a culture of fetish image seeking where images of suffering and pain are decontextualised and dismembered from the events and circulated in the context of communication and interaction between people and online communities. They then become artefacts or cultural commodities for aesthetic consumption, exchange and reciprocity.

The YouTube revolution is symbolic of the modern visuality where endless clips ranging from significant to the mundane form a repository of images which can be accessed and viewed disembedded from their context. They can include clips from mainstream media as well as those captured on mobile technologies by individuals. The lack of any hierarchy within this repository, the decentring of what is political or significant and the culture of image seeking through individual preference and choice is an integral characteristic of this visuality of demand. An endless array of the tragic, comic, banal and salacious images vie for audience attention in these spaces. Naim (2007) points out the multimedia platforms such as YouTube create a 'double echo chamber'; when content is first posted on the web, it is re-aired by mainstream TV networks and on the other hand television moments are given permanent presence by bloggers or activists who redistribute them through websites. Naim contends that the power of the gaze has not gone unnoticed as the notion of non-stop gaze is used as a weapon to hold authorities and powers to account.

Web 2.0 is deemed to be a user-led environment and the manipulation of images enables users to create online videos which can be influenced by real events or personalities. The spoofing of political figures through online videos has in recent years become a common phenomenon. This intertextuality between real events and user-generated content uploaded by users becomes a form of social commentary on important events and in the process it also

captures people's engagement with events and political issues.

The public gaze invites both moral condemnation as well as the possibilities for a mass outcry against images than can evoke pity or outrage. Equally it conjoins the possibility to traverse the perverse, the gruesome or the salacious in these public spaces. The ability to simulate or mock reality (through image manipulation software) transgresses the tenuous boundaries between the real and the inauthentic, where images are produced to both mislead, challenge the authority of public figures, and to cast aspersions on their morality. Video communication enables the evolution of a visual culture that works to elicit a mass response through the act of gazing at images which may not have been intended for mass consumption.

This visual digital culture creates new types of surveillance societies where the gaze is not a one-dimensional construct but multi-dimensional without completely thwarting the politically and ideologically entrenched in societies. The civilian gaze crafts a postmodern surveillance society where the gaze of governments and quasi-government organisations happens in tandem with the civilian ability to capture and record. This civilian gaze compared to the official gaze of governments and authorities is less concerted or organized and can be more sporadic but it nevertheless is unpredictable, pervasive and can descend when it is not expected. It is this unpredictability that makes the civilian gaze and this mediated visuality significant compared to the official gaze which can capture people (both as data and image) as they move about their daily lives.

Tangentially, the dichotomy between those who produce an image and those who consume it may be mediated by people's media literacy and engagement with technology or the appropriation and the attendant incorporation of certain social practices into their everyday lives. The complex relationship with regard to mobile image capture, its dissemination, consumption and archiving contributes to a visual culture which is intimately interwoven with people's engagement with technology and media in their everyday lives. The image then acquires new meanings and functions in this user-led economy. It provides the social capital for engagement and gift-giving as well as an entity to invoke mass spectacle and to offer counter surveillance.

The new mediated visibility conjoins new forms of perverse behaviour and voyeurism which happen alongside more empowering phenomenon. Gazing into people private lives presents a transgression of social norms and boundaries. The pleasure of looking into taboo subjects is increasingly popular in mainstream contemporary television through genres such as reality television where watching the everyday minutiae of other peoples' lives has been elevated into an entrenched media form in popular culture. Video-sharing platforms extend this obsession with consuming peoples' private lives and taboos through interactive media technologies which enables users to customize their preferences, downloads and tags. Secondly, 'public spectacle' beyond functioning as a moral gaze can also turn into a form of public humiliation. In the new media economy the quest for justice can co-exist with puerile motivations. In postmodernity the act of watching leads to new types of power relations where capture and gaze can happen without warning.

The proliferation of user-generated content (whether textual, audio or video) has led to an assumption that it has democratized content creation and image-making leading to new ways of creating and archiving knowledge. This 'empowerment' discourse operates on the premise that user-generated content has blurred the boundaries between producers and consumers. It has not, however, completely displaced the power of mainstream media or their ability to direct and influence political and social agendas. In addition to this, the ability to engage with new media technologies can revolve around access and affordability as well as media literacy. Those with a proficiency for and understanding of new media technologies may be able to better engage with and evolve social practices and connections through com-

munication technologies. This cohort of people, due to their media proficiency, can engage with public spheres and make interventions unlike those who are less adept with new media technology or who do not have access to it. The image economy is also not divorced from capitalist enterprise and degrees of commercialism on the Internet. This commercialism of the web is further complicated by issues of copyright and the legalities surrounding images can construct the act of downloading and uploading into criminal acts of deviance.

Veering away from the questions of authenticity, truth and simulation of reality, this new visuality is textured through this paradigm of risks, duplicity and opportunities, crafting it as a space that can both empower and deceive users. The Internet as an intertextual space which binds the ideologies and realities of the physical world as well as the attributes and communication practices of the virtual world becomes a contested terrain where counter sites can emerge to challenge dominant paradigms and present new forms of visibilities. On the other hand, it can equally manipulate and simulate reality, making it difficult to verify or authenticate information.

What we watch and how we watch also evoke the broader and tenuous position of morality and ethics. Whose codes of ethics should we apply in the non-stop capture and consumption of images? Can global communities strive towards a global ethical project in consuming images and indeed can there be universal ethics with regard to this? The ability to make public means the social codes of what is suitable for public consumption are also challenged. Images which may be considered too gory or gruesome or deemed unsuitable for mass consumption by mainstream media can be accessed on the Internet. When the ex-dictator of Iraq Saddam Hussein was executed various television stations exercised restraint in broadcasting footage of the event captured by mobile technology. Nevertheless it raised ethical discussions about these images being available widely on the internet (Salama, 2007). The denigration of human dignity and the transgression of moral and social taboos and norms are also intrinsic to this visual culture where these new visibilities allude to our perverse need to consume the grotesque and puerile. The posting of videos of macabre beheadings by captors and the use of videos as devices of manipulation and fear were also evident in the war in Iraq. The beheadings carried out by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Tawhid and Jihad group being notable examples (Thompson, 2005, p. 31).

In postmodernity images are also intimately implicated in the construction of self identity. The profiling of self-portraits in social networking sites and the exchange of images and videos amongst strangers and friends through mobile and desktop devices illustrates the fact that these forms of communication have a role to play in constructing self-identity, in the formation of social capital, and in establishing social connections among users. The rise of social networking sites and the increasing degrees of self-exposure through digital content including images and video has created new forms of sociabilities, narcissism, exhibitionist tendencies and voyeurism but in the process it has also enabled new forms of spectacle, surveillance, data mining and cyberstalking. The current popularity of social networking sites has inevitably raised concerns for privacy and security.

The uploading of images to initiate new forms of social connection is then tied to a wider landscape of risk where social networking online can entail publishing personal data which can be endlessly circulated and exploited for commercial and criminal ends such as identity theft and deception of the young and the vulnerable. The increasing revelation of personal data and images online has led to new forms of data mining and surveillance by both governmental departments as well as commercial organizations. Thus surveillance, whether by governments, organisations or people becomes an endemic part of capture and gaze. The politics of self-exposure and the possibility of making social connections and friendships drive the popularity of social networking sites where the invitation to 'gaze' and 'reveal' tap into our human propensity towards narcissism and our

curiosity and perversity to gaze into hitherto hidden or inaccessible domains.

Open repositories, whilst presenting opportunities for people, raise issues of reliability, inaccuracy and misinformation (Maness, 2006). Open editing also means that these sites are open to vandalism and subversive action. Other ethical and moral challenges of user-generated content (UGC) include the occurrence of offensive or undesirable content, issues of privacy, copyright, hate speech, defamation and pornography. Due to the convergence of technologies UGC can acquire a 'feral' quality where it might be difficult to tame or restrain (Walker, 2005). The unrestrained movement of data from networks to mobile private devices enabling it to be accessed anytime and anywhere means that 'data can find you' in the ''age of the portal' (Lash, 2006). Thus users leave 'electronic footprints' while eroding the boundaries between private and public constantly.

Conclusion

The politics of digital visual cultures in postmodernity is complex and multi-faceted as the act of capturing and watching can happen without warning. The non-stop gaze on the digital platforms unleashes a multitude of phenomenon which question the bias and centrality of image in postmodernity. This plurality and lack of centrality in the circulation of images and equally its relationship with mainstream media such as print and broadcasting and its implication in people's everyday lives means that we are fully cognizant of how it reframes and reconfigures our notions of reality. What it asserts in a material sense is the need to re-examine the role of images in different realms of life both public and private. The increasing incorporation of mobile recording devices into our everyday lives and politics of looking in postmodernity can craft new social practices and knowledge archives that can re-narrate history, hold the powerful accountable, create pockets of social communion whilst unleashing new forms of voyeurism, risk paradigms, surveillance and our insatiable quest to make the private public.

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